Article

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Historical Papers / Communications historiques, vol. 5, n° 1, 1970, p. 186-206.

FRENCH POLICY AND THE MUNICH CRISIS OF 1938: A REAPPRAISAL

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For some time now, I have had the conviction that French foreign policy in September 1938 was in need of a reappraisal. On the whole our interpretations have been highly sophisticated, with social malaise and defeatism, as illustrated by the actions of notoriously weak statesmen, serving as our favourite themes. And French policy in particular has long been used to carry the weight of such interpretations – even more so than the much discussed and debated policy of Neville Chamberlain. Certainly, we have been noticeably reluctant to admit that the French government may have avoided war, in 1938, for reasons which had as much to do with military capacity as with deficient will power. Undoubtedly, the most prominent school of historical thought has been that which stresses the weaknesses of France's policy makers rather than the weaknesses of her strategic situation. Mr. Shirer's work on the collapse of France is only the most recent example of this familiar thesis. Having impressively marshalled evidence to reveal the ambivalence of the army's advice and the ominous nature of the air staff's warnings, he concludes nonetheless that the French lacked the "instinctive understanding... that fighting a war is sometimes necessary in order to survive."[1] However obvious that conclusion may appear, it does, it seems to me, overlook a most important question. Did the French government have any reason to believe that the survival of France could have been assured by a war in 1938? Indeed, to press the point a little further, did not the high command's advice to the government suggest that war might well jeopardize rather than ensure the survival of the nation?

This is not to deny the presence of indecision and uncertainty within the ranks of the government. There can be no doubt that it waffled with less than elephantine grace over its policy toward the Czech crisis. Yet, it should be remembered that this government

[1] W. L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic* (London, 1970), 391. For similar interpretations, cf. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Penguin, 1963), 222; J. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich, Prologue to Tragedy* (Papermac, 1966), 60-171; K. Eubank, *Munich* (Norman Oklahoma, 1963), 39-40; H. Noguères, *Munich, The Phoney Peace* (London, 1965), 381; A. P. Adamthwaite, *French Foreign Policy, April 1938-September 1939, With Special Reference to the Policy of M. Georges Bonnet* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds, 1966), 193.

never stopped insisting that France would fight if Czechoslovakia actually were attacked. Even the terrified foreign minister, Georges Bonnet, stubbornly clung to this principle. Though they gave in repeatedly to British arguments, the French remained adamant on this critical point; and significantly the British invariably believed that the French meant what they said. Whatever one might say about the political sagacity of this public and frequently repeated declaration to defend the Czechs against an armed attack, it does bring into question the allegations of defeatism and moral turpitude.

By 1938, France's strategic position was worse than it had been since the darkest days of the first world war. Italian activity in the Iberian peninsula and the Balearic Islands not only exerted new pressures on the Franco-Spanish frontier – the least fortified of all French borders – but also threatened to strangle the essential trans-Mediterranean communication routes between France and North Africa. Moreover, as this menace kept alive the possibility of a Franco-Italian clash, so it also provided indirectly yet another source of tension along their common Alpine frontier. This southern threat in turn accentuated the pressures on France's north-eastern borders. The construction of German fortifications in the Rhineland restricted even further the regional alternatives for a French offensive,[2] while Nazi foreign policy merely reinforced a long-standing French belief that sooner or later Germany would unleash her armies against the Third Republic. The Belgians were even less reliable now than they had been in the past. They had retreated to the status of a neutral power in 1936 and had left behind a frontier with France which was, and promised to remain, unfortified. The British government, as of March 1936, was committed to the defence of French security; however, as yet it had virtually no military contribution to make to a continental land war; and it still refused to become entangled in French commitments east of the Rhine.

France, therefore, was in no position to fulfil effectively her obligations to eastern Europe. Concern for her own security overshadowed any concern for the security of an eastern ally like Czechoslovakia. This is why some historians have concluded that France in effect already had withdrawn from the east – a theory of course which offers a ready explanation for the French failure to act decisively in September 1938. But it is a case where the wrong con-

[2] "It seems that the only course now open to the French is a direct advance into German territory. To do this means . . . deliberately to attack the fortified system in the Rhineland." Report of military attaché, Phipps to Halifax, 21 February 1938, *Public Record Office*, Foreign Office 371, vol. 21593, C 1230/36/17 (hereafter cited as *PRO*, FO 371). Facsimiles of Crown – copyright records in the Public Record Office appear by permission of the Controller of H. M. Stationery Office.

clusion has been reached for the right reason. It was precisely because France felt threatened that she recognized the importance of preserving the independence of Czechoslovakia. After all, this had been the central reason for the creation of French ties with Poland and the countries of the Little Entente, not for the defence of the east but rather for the defence of the west. As one cabinet minister, in 1938, disclosed in his as yet unpublished papers :

> We entered into it (the Czech alliance) for the effective support that it would guarantee us in case of danger. We were not indulging in delicate feelings nor in fraternity; we were making a strategic speculation. We did not simply wish to please a friend : our essential aim was to secure a defender and an ally. [3]

It was in view of France's concept of a two-front strategy that Czechoslovakia assumed its greatest importance, an eastern front which would run from Poland to Yugoslavia and which might be reinforced, though not necessarily, by the Soviet Union. This is why in the late nineteen-thirties the French high command was so insistent that France still had "vital" interests in eastern Europe. [4] This was why every strategic directive drafted by the French chief of staff, in 1938, contained a testimony to the importance of Czechoslovakia.

France's stake in Czechoslovakia was then one of considerable proportion. The Czechs were allies and for that reason could make a powerful appeal to French *honneur* – a point on which Premier Daladier was especially sensitive. [5] The Czechs had a well-trained and disciplined army, one which the French counted on to hold down at least forty German divisions in the east. Czechoslovakia was in fact a major bastion of the second-front strategy. Moreover, Czechoslovakia was the one country in Europe for whom the Russians were legally obliged to fight. Finally, if the Czechs were defeated, Germany would acquire their great industrial resources – like the famous munitions works at Skoda; and the oilfields of eastern Europe would be left vulnerable to further German expansion. For these reasons alone the idea of a German breakthrough in eastern Europe was decidedly unattractive to the French government. But there was yet another reason, perhaps the most compelling of all. The French feared that Germany's drive to the east was essentially a muscle-building exercise to prepare for the final test of strength with the Third Republic. Germany's ultimate field of expansion, Quai d'Orsay

[3] Extract from the unpublished notes of Albert Sarraut. Cited by Noguères, *op. cit.*, 372.

[4] Phipps to Cadogen, 4 January 1938, *PRO*, FO 371, 21672, C 91/85/18. Cf. also E. R. Cameron's article, "Alexis Saint-Léger Léger," in *The Diplomats, 1919-1939*, edited by Craig and Gilbert, ii (Atheneum edition, 1963), 393.

[5] Edouard Daladier to Neville Chamberlain, 5 July 1938, *PRO*, FO 371 21591, C 6972.

officials believed, was the Atlantic regions and not eastern Europe. [6] Germany's gains in the east simply would be used to sustain her final onslaught against France.

Contrary to some suggestions, then, France had not retired from eastern Europe. [7] She had failed to do so because her policy toward the east had come to mean something far more than economic benefits or a voting bloc at Geneva, something too which had little to do with the defence of international law or morality. France's interest in eastern Europe was French security; and certainly since the advent to power of the Nazis the key feature of French policy toward Poland and the countries of the Little Entente was the attempt to keep some semblance of an anti-German front in the east. This objective had become critically important by the autumn of 1938, particularly as the Franco-German military balance appeared to have changed to the advantage of Germany. Indeed, the French high command had been prepared for some time to admit that the outcome of a strictly bilateral war between France and Germany no longer could be regarded with equanimity. In effect, France could not reasonably expect to defeat Germany without the assistance of allies.

And there was little reason to believe that France would be able to lead a military coalition into war against Germany. The British and French ambassadors in Warsaw agreed that Poland was not prepared to assist in the defence of Czechoslovakia. As early as June 1938 both men reported that Poland likely would seize the Teschen district if Hitler launched an attack on the Czechs; and M. Noël warned his minister that initially Poland might adopt a neutral position with a view to joining eventually the ranks of the likely victor. [8] In fact, the Quai d'Orsay was deeply troubled by the possible repercussions of Polish policy. It was feared that Polish action against Czechoslovakia might incur Russian sanctions, thereby leading to a situation in which a Russo-Polish quarrel – possibly including Roumania – only would facilitate Germany's drive against Czechoslovakia. [9]

Indeed, it seemed to the French that Russia was quite capable of exerting an extremely deleterious influence on the international situation. French officialdom, including prominent figures in the

[6] Campbell to Sargent, 13 August 1938, *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, Third Series, ii, no. 626, 96 (hereafter cited as *D.B.F.P.*).

[7] For this conclusion see, particularly, Phipps to Halifax, 16 November 1938, *PRO*, FO 432, C 14025/55/17.

[8] Kennard to Halifax, 4 and 14 June 1938, *D.B.F.P.*, III, ii, nos. 375 and 410, pp. 444-45, 478-80; Léon Noël, *L'Agression allemande contre la Pologne* (Paris, 1946), 167-70.

[9] Bullitt to Sec. of State, 26 August 1938, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1938, i, no. 1355, 556 (hereafter cited as *F.R.U.S.*).

government, the Quai d'Orsay and the service staffs, seems to have indulged commonly in two suspicions : that Stalin hoped to provoke a Franco-German war and, more widely, that Russia scrupulously would avoid involvement in such a conflict. [10] In fact, Daladier took pains to warn the German ambassador that such a war, regardless of its outcome, would be followed by a soviet ideological invasion "bringing world revolution to our lands."[11] Clearly, to most observers in Paris, the Soviet Union was no less dangerous as a friend than as an enemy.

Having judged the Poles and Russians unreliable — each in their own way and, incidentally, for reasons which are difficult to disprove — the French had to pin their hopes for a second front on Czechoslovakia. Virtually no doubt existed in French official quarters that a German attack on Czechoslovakia would be met by determined resistance. But how effective and how prolonged could this resistance be ? Unlike the case of the Poles, whose attitude was questioned more than their capacity, the French looked at the Czechs from a different point of view. Whereas the head of the French military mission in Prague spoke in glowing terms of the Czech armed forces, the high command in Paris was reluctant to subscribe to such assessments by 1938. Indeed, General Faucher later complained that his reports had been contradicted and censured by senior officers in Paris. [12] But, if such were the case, it is hardly adequate ground for concluding that the French government preferred pessimistic to optimistic estimates of Czech capacity. All that Faucher's complaints serve to illustrate is the fact that when cabinet ministers questioned the durability of Czech resistance they did so in full agreement with their most eminent military advisers.

The French government had no reason to believe that the western nations were prepared to participate in a military coalition against Germany. The development of Italo-German relations seemed to offer little hope of securing Italian cooperation. In fact, Italy was now listed as a potential enemy in the high command's strategic directives. [13] Belgium remained committed to a policy of neutrality.

[10] Georges Bonnet, *Quai d'Orsay* (Isle of Man, 1963), 179-80; and *Défense de la Paix*, i, *De Washington au Quai d'Orsay* (Geneva, 1946), 191-203. For the report of General Schweisguth to which Bonnet refers, see Daladier to Delbos, 13 October 1936, *Documents Diplomatiques Français*, Second Series, iii, no. 343, 510-514.

[11] Brauer to Berlin, 7 September 1938, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, D, ii, no. 439, 713 (hereafter cited as *D.G.F.P.*).

[12] *Rapport fait au nom de la Commission chargée d'enquêter sur les événements survenus en France de 1933 à 1945*. Annexes (dépositions), témoignages et documents recueillis par la Commission d'enquête parlementaire, 9 vols. (Paris, 1947), v, 1200-04, 1206, 1208 (hereafter cited as *Evénements*, Testimony).

[13] M. G. Gamelin, *Servir*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1946), iii, 10, 12, 20-21.

Its government would not declare war on Germany unless Hitler attempted to invade Belgium. The British position was clear. Everything had to be done to avert war, especially war in 1938. The United States was equally cautious in its approach to Europe's explosive problems. Indeed, it was in reply to suggestions that the United States would enter an Anglo-French coalition against Germany that President Roosevelt was moved to declare such rumours "a hundred per cent wrong." [14]

On the whole, the French appreciation of the possibilities for creating an anti-German coalition was not only reasonable but substantially accurate. Yet, it would be perfectly fair to ask : could the other powers be expected to commit themselves in the absence of a clear and unequivocal lead from Paris ? It was not enough to insist that a German attack on Czechoslovakia would mean war, a position which the government did take publicly and from which it never deviated. Perhaps what was needed was a bold assertion that Germany's demands were not negotiable. Such a statement might have altered dramatically the attitude of France's real and potential allies. In short, perhaps the best way for France to have engineered a coalition would have been to adopt a unilateral hard line with no regard to the sentiments and fears of other powers. A strong, decisive and in this case an intransigent policy might well have changed the complexion of the international scene.

But the French did not adopt such an attitude. The best that Daladier could suggest was a strong, decisive Anglo-French statement to the effect that the entente would not tolerate a forceful revision of the 1919 peace settlement. Chamberlain refused. He claimed that such a statement would have been tantamount to a bluff. "We would be casting the die," the Prime Minister remarked, "and deciding that in our view this was from the military point of view the opportune moment to declare war on Germany." However, he added, this clearly was not the right moment. The British government, in full accordance with the views of its service staffs, was not at all confident that the entente was as yet strong enough to make victory certain. [15]

If such a joint statement could be described as bluff, how much more true would it have been of a unilateral French declaration ? The answer to this question rests upon the nature of the intelligence information which the Daladier government received through its service ministries. Perhaps this talk of coalitions and a united entente

[14] J. McVickar Haight Jr., "France, the United States and the Munich Crisis," *Journal of Modern History*, xxxii, no. 4 (December 1960), 347.

[15] Anglo-French Conversations, 28-29 April 1938, *D.B.F.P.*, III, i, no. 164, 220-221.

was merely froth whipped up to conceal the uncomfortable fact that the military balance vis-à-vis Germany still remained favourable to France.

A number of accounts which were written in the late nineteen-thirties and in the war years suggested that the French army staff had urged the government to resist German pressure in September 1938.[16] More recent accounts, including that of Mr. Shirer, have emphasized the ambivalent nature of the advice rendered to the government by the high command. Drawing upon published documentation as well as recently released unpublished material in the British archives, I believe it is possible to clarify further the army's response to the Czech crisis.

The first question at hand in early 1938, raised as it was by the Anschluss of Germany and Austria, was whether France could prevent the subsequent destruction of Czechoslovakia. The army's reply to this question was sometimes categoric, sometimes obscure; but on the whole it held out little hope for the continued independence of that country. On 15 March the *Comité Permanent de la Défense Nationale,* meeting in the immediate wake of the Austrian crisis and the change of governments in France, was told by the French chief of staff that the most effective thing the army could do for Czechoslovakia was to mobilize its forces, thereby pinning down as many German troops as possible in the west. Six weeks later, however, the same officer, General Maurice Gamelin, admitted quite openly to the British war minister that it was "impossible for France to give military assistance to Czechoslovakia."[17] It was a question therefore of how long the Czechs could resist an armed German invasion. It would be extremely difficult for any French government to contemplate war on behalf of Czechoslovakia if she were expected to be knocked out of the conflict very quickly, thus leaving France alone to face Germany. By very late September, both Gamelin and his staff officer, Jean Petitbon, were more optimistic than they had ever been, arguing that the Germans could not crack the Czech defences very quickly or without substantial losses.[18] However, the best that Gamelin could do was to estimate that the

[16] Cf. *Le Temps,* 14 October 1938; *The Times,* 14 October; *Manchester Guardian,* 16, 21 and 24 September; *Journal des Nations,* 22 September; *The Observer,* 25 September. See also H. de Kérillis and R. Cartier, *Laisserons-nous démembrer la France?* (Paris, 1939), 62; A. Géraud, *The Grave-Diggers of France* (New York, 1944); Géraud, "Gamelin," *Foreign Affairs,* xix (1940), 310-311.

[17] Gamelin, *op. cit.,* ii, 322-25; Sec. of State for War to the Foreign Office, 24 April 1938, *PRO,* FO 371, C 3783/3474/17. The quoted passage was marked in red by the Foreign Office.

[18] "Conversations Techniques du Général Gamelin au Cabinet Office," 26 September 1938. Notes by General Lelong. *PRO,* Cab. 21, 595, 14/36/22; Phipps to Halifax, 28 September, *PRO,* FO 371, 21770, C 11213/4786/18.

Czechs might resist for a few weeks, though not a few months — an opinion which was neither very precise nor very optimistic.[19] Certainly, Daladier later claimed, with little evidence to the contrary, that he had been led to believe that the Czechs could not have held out for long.[20]

It is doubtful whether the French government knew a great deal more about the intentions of its own army. Indeed, the army staff itself seems to have been uncertain about its projected course of action. There was no question of a major strategic advance in September 1938. The whole weight of French military doctrine prevailed against such a move. This does not mean, as is so repeatedly claimed, that the French had foresaken the principle of offensives. Quite the reverse. Their offensive was to be on such a large scale and the product of such intensive preparation that it was estimated that it might take as long as two years to set in operation.[21] The best that could be expected, in 1938, were local and very limited tactical offensives; and this sort of operation the army staff was prepared to carry out. But where and with what results ? The obvious theatre was along the Rhine; and Gamelin frequently declared himself ready to issue the necessary orders. Nevertheless, the chief of staff was subject to a number of doubts. In early March, he told Daladier in so many words that general mobilization was an indispensable prerequisite for any effective French action. But General Petitbon later confided to a colleague that his superior had been determined not to request authorization for such a measure until Czechoslovakia had been defeated and the German army actually had turned on France.[22] No less peculiar was Gamelin's assessment of the German defences. Whereas, in March, he had predicted long and bitter fighting in the west, and subsequently had drafted a directive which was to commit a "minimum number" of troops against those defences,[23] he later seems to have changed his mind — or at least partially changed his mind. By the summer, he was censuring reports which emphasized the strength of the German fortifications and assuring the British that the Siegfried Line was as yet not terribly formidable.[24]

[19] FO Memorandum (Creswell), 26 September 1938, *PRO*, FO 371, 21782, C 10722/10722/18.

[20] *Evénements*, Testimony, Daladier, i, 28; and his letter to the commission, dated 21 May 1951, ix, 2889.

[21] Gamelin, *op. cit.*, i, 33. Cf. also the author's chapter on French military doctrine in an unpublished dissertation entitled *Strategy and Diplomacy in France* (University of London, 1969).

[22] Gamelin, *op. cit.*, ii, 318-19; *Evénements*, Testimony, de Villelume, ix, 2768.

[23] Gamelin, *op. cit.*, ii, 324; iii, 11-12. Directive of 8 June 1938, *ibid.*, iii, 26-32.

[24] P. Stehlin, *Témoignage pour l'Histoire* (Paris, 1964), 85; R. J. Minney, *The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha* (London, 1960), 147; "Talk with Anthony Eden," 12 September 1938, in the *B. H. Liddell Hart Papers*.

Why the general should have grown less rather than more concerned about these defences – particularly as the Germans had accelerated their fortification programme in May – is not at all clear. In any case, it was not a complete turnabout for he was still talking in September of "a series of limited offensives" and was still loath to assess the effects of such action with any optimism. [25]

But it was not a foregone conclusion that a French offensive would be undertaken in the west and against the Germans. For over a year the high command had been contemplating the possibilities of an offensive elsewhere, preferably against the Italians whose military prowess was a subject of some derision in French army circles. The logic of such a strategy, in so far as the Czech question was concerned, is not immediately, nor perhaps ultimately, evident. One disgruntled official in the British Foreign Office complained in March 1938:

> But when one asks how the French are going to fight for Czechoslovakia the only answer one gets is that they will march – in Libya! [26]

And not just Libya. By mid-September, Gamelin's plan of action was said to include local attacks against Italy along the south coast and amphibious attacks against Sardinia or Sicily. [27] Needless to say, this plan – if such it was – was based on the twin assumptions that France was unlikely to find herself at war with Germany alone and that the Italians themselves, and not just their peninsula, were the soft underbelly of Europe. But this strategy almost certainly contained a striking degree of feckless dreaming. The long-prevailing and intense concern over the acute shortage of French military manpower made it most improbable that simultaneous offensives in Europe and North Africa could have been contemplated seriously. And if this observation is even partially correct, there is good reason to believe that there were at least two possible plans of action, neither one of which had been decided upon on the eve of the Munich conference. This very significant element of uncertainty could only have limited even further the government's confidence in the outcome of armed hostilities.

Moreover, at no time did the army staff give an unequivocal opinion on the most important question of all. Could France expect to win a war against Germany? Indeed, the degree of ambivalence in the high command's estimates was most remarkable. On 12 Sep-

[25] Phipps to Halifax, 8 September 1938, *PRO*, FO 371, 21596, C 9420/36/17.

[26] FO Minute (Strang). Phipps to Cadogan, 24 March 1938, *PRO*, FO 371, 21713, C 2250/1941/18.

[27] Phipps to Halifax, 17 September 1938, enclosure from military attaché, *PRO*, FO 371, 21596, C 10082/36/17.

tember, for example, Gamelin assured Daladier that in the event of war France would determine the peace settlement just as she had done in 1919. It was an unfortunate analogy since neither Britain, Russia, nor the United States – each of whom was entitled to some credit for the victory over Germany in the first world war – was committed to a French-sponsored anti-German front in 1938. No doubt for this reason Gamelin completed his *tour d'horizon* with advice which seemed somewhat at variance with his bold and confident opening.

> As long as the French government does not order the commencement of hostilities, that is to say, does not declare war, it would remain in control of the situation. [28]

Could one imagine a more subtle appeal for peace?

By late September, however, the general's attitude seems to have changed appreciably. Certainly the estimates which he delivered to the British authorities on 26 September were noticeably more optimistic than anything which Daladier had heard to that point. [29] Indeed, by contrasting German weaknesses with French strengths, Gamelin was able to be quite reassuring. Without question this was a deliberate attempt to stiffen the British position. For example, the general reported that the present disposition of forces along the Franco-German frontier showed 15 French divisions opposing a total of 8 German divisions. Significantly, he did not tell the British what he had told Daladier, that French intelligence anticipated the presence of 50 German divisions in the west within a week of German mobilization. [30] In fact, in every respect, including his encouraging assessment of the Czech army, Gamelin expressed a considerable degree of confidence and composure.

But the general's appraisal was a long way from a prediction of victory. His own account of the visit to London must be supplemented by the notes of the French military attaché as well as by the British record of the proceedings. From this new evidence one is able to draw the following conclusions. First, French land strategy consisted of plans to launch offensives along the Rhine and in North Africa. But the European operation, concerning the timing of which Gamelin remained vague, was to be an extremely tentative one. The French would attack until they met sustained resistance

[28] Gamelin, *op. cit.*, ii, 346-47.

[29] Cf. FO Memorandum (Creswell), 28 September 1938, *PRO*, FO 371, 21782, C 10722/10722/18; "Conversations Techniques du Général Gamelin . . .," Cab. 21, 595, 14/36/22; "Notes of a Meeting Held at about 11 a.m. on the 26th September 1938 to obtain the views of General Gamelin . . .," Cab. 21/595; Gamelin, *op. cit.*, ii, 351-52.

[30] Gamelin, *op. cit.*, ii, 345-47; General Gauché, *Le Deuxième Bureau au Travail, 1935-1940* (Paris, 1953), 139.

and would then retreat back to the defences of the Maginot Line. In the spring they would engage the Italians in the Alps and possibly in Libya while the Germans battered themselves against the French fortifications. Second, although the French air force expected to run missions against the Rhine bridges and industrial conglomerations, it would not attack "towns" for fear of German reprisal. Moreover, Gamelin quickly agreed to the British suggestion that the Ruhr industries should not be bombed at the outset of hostilities, despite the fact that he estimated that fifty per cent of German munitions and war equipment came from that region. In any case, he did not expect the air campaign to affect seriously the land operations, a judgment which offered little solace to those French and British observers who were more cognisant of the potential of modern air power. A half-hearted land offensive, calculated to end in retreat, and an extremely limited air offensive, could hardly pretend to serve as a formula for victory. [31]

The outstanding feature of Gamelin's strategic appraisal, however, was the premise that France could not expect to defeat Germany by herself. In every communication with Daladier, in every brief submitted to him, the army staff repeatedly stressed this point. In April, when the Premier asked the army what France could do for Czechoslovakia, the reply he received concentrated instead on Italian, Russian, Polish and British reactions. In short, it was an implicit refusal to consider the possibility of unilateral action against Germany. Daladier got the same sort of response on 12 September, the day Gamelin declared that France would be able to dictate the peace as in 1919. [32] And precisely the same thing happened when Gamelin addressed the British on 26 September. Whatever confidence he displayed was tied to the hope – it was never an assumption – that Russia would be able to assist Czechoslovakia from the air and that an eastern front "running north to south from the Moravian Gate down through Hungary to the Yugoslav frontier" would prove politically possible. Even more to the point, given his British audience, Gamelin insisted on the need for British bombing support against the Germans in Europe and the Italians in North Africa, and for a British expeditionary force to bolster the French units along the Belgian frontier. According to the notes of General Lelong, Gamelin categorically declared :

[31] Seen in this light there was some justification for Phipps to have been told of Gamelin's "disturbing estimate." Cf. Halifax to Phipps, 27 September, *D.B.F.P.*, III, ii, no. 1143, 575-76. Otherwise, the accuracy of this description must be questioned. In this connection see Creswell's minute on the despatch, Phipps to Halifax, 28 September, *PRO*, FO 371, 21770, C 11213/4786/18.

[32] Gamelin, *op. cit.*, ii, 318-19, 345-47.

> Si l'on met à part la Russie, dont l'aide immédiate est difficile, les Armées françaises et tchécoslovaques représentent les seules forces prêtes : elles constituent la "couverture" des forces du monde entier qui, il faut l'espérer, se rangeront du côté des puissances démocratiques. Il est nécessaire du *(sic)* ne pas la faire battre isolément par une action inconsidérée. Elle peut tenir ce rôle. Mais, *pour gagner la guerre elle aura besoin d'être aidée.* [33]

Faced with this information it is hardly surprising that the French government hesitated before the prospect of war. Czechoslovakia could not hold off a German invasion indefinitely; and unless the Czechs took Gamelin's advice by retreating from the western salient (including Prague) into Moravia, the Germans might well secure an early victory. No cabinet minister, including Daladier, the minister of national defence as well as Premier, could have been sure what the French army would decide to do in the event of hostilities. All they could have known was that the only alternative to a campaign in Europe was an extension of belligerency to include Italy, as the necessary prelude to an offensive in Africa. Finally, at no time did a genuine assurance of victory come from the French high command. Indeed, the government was given every reason to believe that without a guarantee of an extensive anti-German coalition France could not expect to win the war.

The advice which the government received from the air staff was more categorical though no less pessimistic. The message from this quarter was as clear as it was persistent. Under no circumstances could France contemplate a war in 1938. At least four times between January and September the chief of staff, General Vuillemin, officially warned the government that war had to be averted. In fact, he is reported to have threatened the government with his resignation if this advice were ignored. [34] The quantitative and qualitative inferiority of the French air force relative to the German, as well as the severe imbalance between the French and German monthly production rates, were cited as irrefutable arguments for preserving the peace. It was a point of view which was subscribed to by the air minister, the air intelligence bureau, the Chamber's air committee, the British air attaché, and other informed but independent observers.

[33] "Conversations Techniques du Général Gamelin . . .," *PRO,* Cab. 21, 595, 14/36/21; FO Memorandum, 26 September, *ibid.,* FO 371, 21782, C 10722/10722/18.

[34] Phipps to Halifax, 3 November, *PRO,* FO 371, 21613, C 13372/1050/17.

[35] The production figures given by La Chambre were 35/month in France and 350/month in Germany. *Evénements,* Testimony, ii, 295-96. Cf. also *Journal Officiel de la République Française.* Sénat. Débats Parlementaires, cxxvii, 29 December 1937, 1402-1405. British estimates in May 1937 showed 950 German bombers compared to 230 French fighters. C.I.D. Chiefs of Staff Subcommittee Report, *PRO,* FO 371, 20701, C 1406/G/205/62.

It is important to remember that this bleak appraisal did not have its origins in the Czech crisis as has so often been alleged. It was not conceived or concocted as a reply to a threat of imminent war. Germany had achieved superiority in first line strength by May of 1937. Her production rate throughout that year was estimated by French intelligence as being ten times that of France. Moreover, she enjoyed a distinct numerical superiority in terms of those machines which could fly at speeds in excess of two hundred miles per hour. Finally, according to British estimates, the ratio of German bomber strength to French fighter strength in 1937 was three to one.[35] There could be no doubt that France's security in the air was very much in jeopardy. This was the reason that Vuillemin, two months before the German invasion of Austria, warned the air minister that :

> The situation is extremely serious. We do not know what the future holds for us, but I am convinced that if a conflict erupts this year, the French air force will be wiped out in a few days.[36]

Vuillemin saw no reason to change his mind between January and September. His visit to Germany in August only reinforced his opinion that the Luftwaffe was "vastly more formidable" than his own force.[37] Officers charged with the task of determining French air strategy in the *Centre des Hautes Études Aériennes* agreed with this depressing conclusion.[38] The information which had been compiled by the French embassy in Berlin also endorsed this view. Both Stehlin, the air attaché, and Armengaud, the former Inspector-General of the air force, had concluded in the latter's words that the "German air force was literally overwhelming compared to our own, overwhelming even in the event of an Anglo-French air coalition."[39] La Chambre, the air minister, did little to contradict this conclusion. According to a British report of 16 September the minister gave a "quite catastrophic" description of the French air force to the Chamber's air commission, saying in part that France had only 20 planes which could compete with the fastest German models and that only 500 French machines were "fit to take the air." Perhaps it was with this chilling appreciation in mind that the vice-president of this commission subsequently concluded that the French air force would have ceased to exist

[36] Note for the minister, 15 January 1938, *Guy La Chambre Papers.* A copy of the documents is found in *Evénements,* Testimony, La Chambre, ii, 300-302.

[37] Henderson (Berlin) to Halifax, 23 August 1938, *PRO,* FO 371, 21710, C 8693/1425/18.

[38] Statement made by General René de Vitrolles in a letter to the author of 24 March 1970.

[39] Stehlin, *op. ctt.,* 90; General Armengaud, *Batailles politiques et militaires sur l'Europe. Témoignage 1932-1940* (Paris, 1948), 72-74. Armengaud had been given complete access to the embassy files.

within a fortnight of the opening of hostilities.[40] The fêted air expert, Charles Lindbergh, and the extremely knowledgeable and well-informed B. H. Liddell Hart also subscribed to the view that the French air force was in no position to fight a war in 1938.[41]

According to British and French statistics alike, there could be no doubt about the existence of critical deficiencies within the French air force. In late September 1938, the government was advised by its technical experts that German production rates per month stood at 800, compared to no more than 50 machines on the part of France. Germany was reported to have a total of 6,000 serviceable machines, 4,000 of which had full crews, compared to a grand total of 1,500 machines in France. Finally, out of 500 fighter aircraft, virtually none in France could be expected to exceed 250 miles per hour.[42] Indeed, Lindbergh later expressed doubt as to whether France had had "a single fighter between Paris and the frontier during the recent crisis capable of competing with the German machines."[43]

It might be noted that the British air ministry displayed a certain reluctance to accept what it took to be some excessively pessimistic reports on the French air force. In late September the air attaché in Paris and indirectly his ambassador, Sir Eric Phipps, received a mild rebuke from the ministry in London for having made too much of French air weakness. In fact, some observers in the British air ministry suspected that the French air staff was trying deliberately to discredit the Daladier government.[44] Be that as it may, there certainly was no attempt in the air ministry or in the Committee of Imperial Defence to deny that France's air capacity was decidedly inferior to that of Germany.

But it is easy to get lost in a maze of statistics, to a point where their significance almost becomes subservient to the figures themselves. How did the air imbalance affect the French appreciation of the Czech crisis? First of all it meant that unrestricted air

[40] Phipps to Halifax, 16 September, *PRO*, FO 371, 21596, C 9944/36/17; and Phipps to Halifax, 30 September, *ibid.*, C 11265/36/17.

[41] Phipps to Halifax, 26 September, *ibid.*, 21710, C 10790/1425/18; memorandum prepared by Liddell Hart for Winston Churchill and Hugh Dalton, entitled "Appreciation of the war which now threatens," 28 September 1938, *B. H. Liddell Hart Papers.*

[42] Phipps to Halifax, 23 September, *PRO*, FO 371, 21710, C 10674/1425/18; Phipps to Halifax, 30 September, *ibid.*, 21596, C 11265/36/17; Air Ministry to Foreign Office, 19 September, *ibid.*, C 10163/36/17.

[43] Henderson to Halifax, 18 October, *ibid.*, 21710, C 12745/1425/18. Cf. also Sir Maurice Hankey's report on France and his reference to the "deplorable state" of French aviation. Phipps to Halifax, 4 October, *ibid.*, 21600, C 11641/55/17.

[44] Air Ministry to Foreign Office, 27 September, *PRO*, FO 371, 21596, C 12038/36/17. See, however, the ministry's own critical estimate of the French air force, Air Ministry to Foreign Office, 19 September, *ibid.*, C 10163/36/17.

warfare against Germany, especially missions directed against the Ruhr, ran the risk of provoking massive German retaliation against France's civilian population. Consequently, this unfavourable balance imposed significant restrictions on the offensive role of the French air force. But even more important, the wave of air scare literature which had swept Europe in the nineteen-thirties had produced a profound, even an exaggerated, respect for the destructive potential of modern air power. Although Gamelin was always sceptical of the positive role which the air force could play in a military campaign, he certainly did appreciate the toll which air power could take on civilian populations. In fact this was why he told the British that the evacuation of all principal cities in north-eastern France, including Paris, was an indispensable prerequisite for any French land offensive against Germany. "If we had an air force," the general confided to two of his young staff officers, "this would be a good game to play."[45] The writings of Douhet in Italy and Vauthier in France, along with those of many others, had presented a horrifying picture of chemical and biological warfare being waged from the air; and the stern though not entirely accurate prophesy of a British statesman, to the effect that the bomber would always get through, seemed to confirm the worst fears of Europe's populace.[46]

On 20 September 1938, the secretary of Britain's Committee of Imperial Defence prepared a memorandum on the air situation, a memorandum which subsequently was circulated to a number of cabinet ministers. The air situation, General Ismay concluded, "was the crux of the whole matter." Germany was clearly superior to Britain and France in the air; and for the moment the balance of advantage was on the side of the attacker. But this situation was unlikely to last for long, owing to the fact that improvements in fighter aircraft and ground defences already were compensating for improvements in modern bombers. "In fact," he noted, "time should reduce the ascendancy which the attacker at present enjoys in air warfare." Consequently, since Germany's ground defences had now reached a "saturation point," there seemed every reason to believe that the British and French air defence systems would be up to the German level in a year's time. In other words, whereas Germany's defensive position could only improve marginally, the British and French improvements could alter substantially the air balance situation.

[45] Note by General Olivier Poydenot, entitled "La crise tchécoslovaque de l'été 1938." Prepared for the author and received under a cover note of 10 April 1970.

[46] Cf., for example, P. Vauthier, *Le danger aérien et l'avenir du pays* (Paris, 1930); and Vauthier's *La doctrine de guerre de Général Douhet* (Paris, 1935). For Baldwin's statement on the bomber, see K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London, 1969), 735.

> It follows, therefore, that, from the military point of view, time is in our favour, and that, if war with Germany has to come, it would be better to fight her in say 6-12 months' time, than to accept the present challenge. [47]

Whether or not this argument had a significant effect on the attitude of the British cabinet is difficult to say. But for a government which had been warned recently that a German air offensive against England could deliver 600 tons of bombs per day for a period of at least two months, such an argument was likely to have been found very persuasive. [48] Certainly Neville Chamberlain, in the post-Godesberg cabinet meeting of 24 September, made a special point of raising this consideration before his colleagues. [49] And it is most likely that the French also were susceptible to the type of argument advanced by Ismay. The emphasis which he placed on the power of defence might have been ripped from the pages of French military doctrine; and his prediction that fighter aircraft held the key to the future seems to have been endorsed by the fact that France was now concentrating almost exclusively on fighter production.

The Ismay memorandum did not pretend to speak on behalf of the Committee of Imperial Defence; however, the formal conclusions of the committee and the personal conclusions of its secretary were strikingly similar. A week earlier the chiefs of staff subcommittee had prepared for the cabinet a document entitled "Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War Against Germany." Without a doubt the air menace loomed large in the minds of the three chiefs of staff. Indeed, it was at this time that they consciously advised against air strikes on the German Ruhr. The main reason for this recommendation, they declared, was that

> the weight of attack which we and French could deliver is in our opinion inadequate to produce decisive results and must inevitably provoke immediate reprisal action on the part of Germany at a time when our defences at home both active and passive are very far from complete.

In so far as Czechoslovakia was concerned, the subcommittee said quite categorically that nothing could be done by Britain or France to prevent Germany "from inflicting a decisive defeat" on her. It was not a question of saving that country but rather of restoring her in

[47] "Note on the Question of whether it would be to our military advantage to fight Germany now or to postpone the issue," *PRO*, Cab. 21, 544, 14/2/51. Ismay subsequently changed his mind. Cf. his memoirs, *The Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay* (London, 1960), 92.

[48] C.I.D. Chiefs of Staff Subcommittee, 14 September 1938, *PRO*, Cab. 24/278, C.P. 199/38. For a similar estimate, see also C.I.D. Minutes of a Meeting, 28 October 1937, *PRO*, Cab 2/6.

[49] Cabinet Conclusions, 24 September 1938, *PRO*, FO 371, 21744, C 11441/1941/18.

the course of time; however, such a restoration "could only be achieved by the defeat of Germany and as the outcome of a prolonged struggle, which from the outset must assume the character of an unlimited war." Lest the cabinet should have any doubts about the meaning of the term "unlimited," the chiefs of staff made it clear that such a war could involve the intervention of Italy and/or Japan. Then, in a very succinct and pointed conclusion, the three senior officers referred to one of their earlier warnings:

> ... war against Japan, Germany and Italy simultaneously in 1938 is a commitment which neither the present nor the projected strength of our defence forces is designed to meet, even if we were in alliance with France and Russia ... [50]

There can be little doubt that the British defence establishment, like its French counterpart, was extremely sceptical about the physical capacity of the entente to engage in war with Germany in 1938.

But in France, as in Britain, ultimate responsibility did not reside with the service staffs. The government had to determine its policy in accordance with the information available to it. The cabinet had to decide. And Daladier's ministers were sharply divided. The so-called resisters were the largest group in the cabinet. [51] Convinced that Hitler would retreat in the face of determined opposition, they played down the importance of the military situation. Like their spiritual compatriot in the British government, Duff Cooper, this group seems to have concluded that "when great moral issues were at stake, there was no time to weigh out one's strength too carefully." [52] Those who adopted the line of the foreign minister, the Bonnetistes, were no less committed to the other extreme. Peace to them was as great a moral issue as the safety of Czechoslovakia; and it was they who used the military factor as more of a justification than as a reason for the policy of peace at any price. [53] It is this group, consisting of Bonnet, Pomaret, Marchandeau, de Monzie and Chautemps, which has been held up in the past as the clearest evidence of

[50] C.I.D. Chiefs of Staff Subcommittee, 14 September, *PRO*, Cab. 24/278, C.P. 199/38. The chiefs of staff were confident only in terms of the navy. Anglo-French forces were clearly superior to those of the Axis. For this reason, and because the navy could do little for the security of north-eastern France, naval considerations do not seem to have figured prominently in the deliberations of the French cabinet.

[51] Included in this group were Reynaud, Mandel, Champetier de Ribes, Sarraut, Patenôtre, Zay, Queuille, Campinchi and Gentin. Cf. Phipps to Halifax, 22 October, *PRO*, FO 432, C 12854/55/17; Phipps to Halifax, 2 November, *PRO*, FO 371, 21613, C 13394/1050/17; Phipps to Halifax, 16 November, *PRO*, FO 371, 21600, C 14025/55/17.

[52] Cabinet Conclusions, 25 September, *PRO*, FO 371, 21742, C 10929/1941/18.

[53] Bonnet reports that de Monzie, Pomaret, and especially Chautemps, were particularly careful to justify their positions in the light of the military situation. Letter to the author of 4 April 1970.

defeatism in France. That there were resisters at any price is frequently, and too often conveniently, forgotten. [54] But neither group, one which sought to ignore the military circumstances, the other which sought to exploit them, was emotionally equipped to regard those circumstances with any objectivity. That task fell, in a sense by default, to the middle group led by Daladier and La Chambre. [55] This was entirely appropriate not only because Daladier was Premier but because, as minister for national defence for the past two years, no civilian could rival his knowledge of the French military establishment. Moreover, under no circumstances could it have been judicious for him to have exaggerated the weaknesses of French military capacity. His government as well as his own personal competence as a minister would have been dangerously compromised.

The fact remains, however, that the information which confronted Daladier in late September 1938 was not of the sort to counsel resistance. It hardly bears repeating that the people of France did not want war, but neither did the Premier; yet he called them "idiots" when they applauded what he had done at Munich. Unlike Chamberlain, whose image was shaped so incontrovertibly and not entirely with justice by his triumphant return from Munich, Daladier privately displayed only bitterness and humiliation. "This has been very hard, very hard," he told Gamelin at Le Bourget airport. "For a moment I thought that I was going to break." Later, to members of his cabinet he said, "I do not think that in our present situation anything else could have been done." [56]

On the evening before he left for Munich, the air staff once again had reminded him that their forces were totally unprepared for war. The first line strength of 700 planes, the performance of which was described as *insuffisante,* was expected to be slashed by sixty per cent in the first two months of war – an estimate which was the brightest the Premier had heard for months. It was still a devastating prediction. He certainly carried with him to Munich an awareness of Vuillemin's "terribly worried" state of mind and a determination to take immediate steps to strengthen the air force which, so he told the air attaché in Berlin, was "the worst prepared but the most important." [57] Later

[54] For a report on France's "firm and melancholy determination to resist," see Phipps to Halifax, 26 September, *PRO,* FO 432, C 10713/1941/18. It should be noted that three ministers (Reynaud, Mandel and Champetier de Ribes) tendered, though subsequently withdrew, their resignations during the September crisis.

[55] Including Chappedelaine, Julien and Rucart. La Chambre believes that the military factor was decisive in the government's decision to negotiate the Czech problem. Interview with the author, 16 May 1967.

[56] "Cela a été très dur, très dur. A un moment, j'ai cru que j'allais tout casser." Note by General Poydenot, *op. cit.,* Gamelin *op. cit.,* ii, 359.

[57] "Note sur la réunion du 23 Août," p. 10, *Guy La Chambre Papers; Evénements,* Testimony, La Chambre, ii, 312-313; Stehlin, *op. cit.,* 104-105.

to William Bullitt, the American ambassador and one of Daladier's confidants, and to the French chiefs of staff, the Premier stressed the importance of air power in any future diplomatic negotiations with Hitler's Germany.

> If I had had a thousand bombers behind me to support the voice of France, I would have been in a much stronger position at Munich to resist Hitler's demands; and perhaps we would not have been forced to sign what we did sign. [58]

But it is most unlikely that the air situation was solely responsible for the direction which French policy took in September 1938. Even the most convinced advocate of air power – and Daladier never fully shared the scepticism displayed by his military advisers – could not have regarded the air force to the exclusion of the land army. The army after all was the senior service in influence as well as in tradition; and Gamelin, the chief of staff for national defence, was very much an army product. Although some of the officers at the war ministry were quick to draw a connection between the air situation and this "capitulation pas très glorieuse," [59] it was not enough to save the reputation of what had been known for years as the best army in Europe.

Although the army staff emphasized the strategic importance of Czechoslovakia, at no time did it actively urge the government to resist the German demands. [60] For that matter, at no time since he had become chief of the general staff did Gamelin actually recommend any policy in a crisis situation. The general argued that such recommendations did not fall within his mandate as chief of staff, a position which deprived civilian ministers of any lead on complicated matters of strategy and tactics. And some sort of lead clearly was necessary in September 1938 in view of the presence of two plans : one which proposed to aid the Czechs by attacking the Italians in North Africa, the other which envisaged a tactical offensive toward the Rhine followed by a tactical retreat toward the French fortifications. The army stressed the need for allies when none was readily available; it warned the government not to expect an early

[58] *Procès du Maréchal Pétain* (Paris, 1945), 168. Testimony of General Paul Vauthier; Bullitt to Sec. of State, 3 October, *F.R.U.S.*, 1938, i, no. 1678, 712. Generals Jean Petitbon and Olivier Poydenot, both of whom were on Gamelin's personal staff, conclude that the air situation was particularly important in the determination of government policy in September 1938. Letters to the author of 9 March and 10 April 1970.

[59] Phipps to Halifax, 5 October, *PRO*, FO 371, 21784, C 11834/11169/18. General René Bouscat, La Chambre's military adviser, sees this conclusion as an attempt to make the air force a "scapegoat" *(le bouc émissaire);* but he prefers to remain silent for fear of creating "opposition entre français." Letter to the author of 26 March 1970.

[60] For the importance attached to Czechoslovakia by the high command, see Daladier's "Munich. Vingt-trois ans après," *Le Nouveau Candide,* September-October 1961.

decision in the west, but assured the British that the German defences were far from being ready; it maintained that general mobilization was necessary before effective action could be taken against Germany, but refused to request authorization for such a measure until the Germans had turned on France. Inconsistency and dithering were the two most prominent features of the army's conduct in September 1938. But extreme caution, almost beyond the point of credibility, was also in evidence. By 30 September there were no more than 10 German divisions in the west, two or three of which were reserve divisions. The French had 23 regular divisions on a war footing, with another 10 backing them up from their peace stations just behind the frontier. The military odds were overwhelmingly in favour of France, a conclusion which was fully endorsed by the German high command. [61] But Daladier had been assured that appearances were deceiving. The army's intelligence bureau warned that Germany could mobilize 120 divisions, that she could activate all of them within a week of the mobilization order, and that 50 of them would be used to resist any French offensive. [62] In short, what seemed to be a two-to-one advantage in favour of France was really no more than parity at best. The French high command did not recommend a policy of armed resistance. It did not present a case for one.

This paper has not sought to discard those interpretations which have related French foreign policy in 1938 to the apparent internal malaise of the Third Republic. Its object merely has been to raise for your consideration the role of military capability in this long-standing debate. Almost certainly a war-taught pacificism, a strife-torn economy and an inability to decide whether the greatest peril to France came from left-wing ideology or right-wing militarism, contributed much to the government's appraisal of the Czech crisis. But it is surely incorrect to suggest that France had grown indifferent to the fate of eastern Europe; and it is doubtful in the extreme that military considerations were used simply as a pretext for a policy of inaction. Such a conclusion would imply that the military balance vis-à-vis Germany was not unfavourable to France; and that implication was contradicted by every piece of military intelligence submitted to the minister of national defence and Premier, Édouard Daladier. General Gamelin later explained France's surrender in terms of the air situation and the policies then being pursued by Britain, Poland

[61] War Office Memorandum, 3 November, *PRO*, FO 371, 21670, C 13563/65/18; Phipps to Halifax, 22 September, *D.B.F.P.*, III, ii, no. 1028, 461; and *ibid.*, no. 1012, 452-54; T. Taylor, *The Sword and the Swastika* (New York, 1952), 206-07.

[62] Gamelin, *op. cit.*, ii, 345-47; Gauché, *op. cit.*, 139. British intelligence reported that Germany would be unable to mobilize and equip 100 divisions before 1942. Cabinet Conclusions, 4 May 1938, *PRO*, FO 371, 21667, C 3913/65/18.

and Russia.[63] In other words, Daladier went to Munich because France could not go to war with Germany – on land or in the air – without unequivocal guarantees of allied support. On the basis of the military reports with which he was obliged to work, such a rationale does not seem to have been entirely unwarranted. When it is a matter of submission or resistance, any government might be expected to ask two questions. What must we pay for war; and what must we pay for peace? If the answer to the first is not only destruction, human life, but defeat, attention invariably focuses on the second. The French army staff never talked of defeat, only of victory. Their estimates, however, were as compatible with the one prospect as they were with the other. The air staff never talked of victory, only of disaster. To denigrate the significance of the military factor, to suggest that it was simply used by weak-willed men in a morally deficient country as a pretext for surrender, is to allege that the military circumstances of September 1938 would not and did not adequately support their defence. The information which was placed at the government's disposal suggests otherwise.

[63] *Evénements*, Testimony, Gamelin, ii, 393. This interpretation accords completely with the general defence of his policies which Daladier conducted in 1946. Cf. *J.O. Debates, Assemblée Nationale Constituante*, 18 July 1946, 2679-80.